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R. Geuss: Philosophy and Real Politics

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Introduction

A strong “Kantian” strand is visible in much contemporary political theory, and even perhaps in some real political practice. This strand expresses itself in the highly moralised tone in which some public diplomacy is conducted, at any rate in the English-speaking world, and also in the popularity among political philosophers of the slogan “Politics is applied ethics.” Slogans like this can be dangerous precisely because they are slickly ambiguous, and this one admits of at least two drastically divergent interpretations. There is what I will call “the anodyne” reading of the slogan, which formulates a view I fully accept, and then there is what I will call the “ethics-first” reading.

The anodyne reading asserts that “politics”—meaning both forms of political action and ways of studying forms of political action—is not and cannot be a strictly value-free enterprise, and so is in the very general sense an “ethical” activity. Politics is a matter of human, and not merely mechanical, interaction between individuals, institutions, or groups. It can happen that a group of passengers in an airplane are thrown together mechanically when it crashes, or that a man slipping off a bridge accidentally lands on a tramp sleeping under the bridge. The second of these two examples is a sal-

utary reminder of the role of contingency and of the unexpected in history, but neither of the two cases is a paradigm for politics. Political actors are generally pursuing certain conceptions of the “good,” and acting in the light of what they take to be permissible. This is true despite the undeniable fact that most human agents most of the time are weak, easily distracted, deeply conflicted, and confused, and that they therefore do not always do only things they take to be permissible. One will never understand what they are doing unless and until one takes seriously the ethical dimension of their action in the broadest sense of that term: their various value-judgments about the good, the permissible, the attractive, the preferable, that which is to be avoided at all costs. Acting in this way can perfectly reasonably be described as “applying ethics,” provided one understands that “applying” has very few similarities with giving a proof in Euclidean geometry or calculating the load-bearing capacities of a bridge, and is often more like the process of trying to survive in a free-for-all. Provided also one keeps in mind a number of other important facts, such as the unavoidable indeterminacy of much of human life. Every point in a Cartesian coordinate system is construed as having a determinate distance from the x-axis and from the y-axis. This way of thinking is of extremely limited usefulness when one is dealing with any phenomenon connected with human desires, beliefs, attitudes, or values. People often have no determinate beliefs at all about a variety of subjects; they often don’t know what they want or why they did something; even when they know or claim to know what they want, they can often give no coherent account of why exactly they want what they claim to want; they often have no idea which portions of their sys-

tems of beliefs and desires—to the extent to which they have determinate beliefs and desires—are “ethical principles” and which are (mere empirical) “interests.” This is not simply an epistemic failing, and also not something that one could in principle remedy, but a pervasive “inherent” feature in human life. Although this fundamental indeterminacy is a phenomenon almost everyone confronts and recognises in his or her own case all the time, for a variety of reasons we are remarkably resistant to accepting it as a general feature of the way in which we should best think about our social life, but we are wrong to try to evade it. A further reason to be suspicious of quasi-Cartesian attitudes to human life is that people are rarely more than locally consistent in action, thought, and desire, and in many domains of human life this does not matter at all, or might even be taken to have positive value. I may pursue a policy that is beneficial to me in the short term, but that “in the long run” will undermine itself. This may not even be subjectively “irrational,” given that in the *long* run, as Keynes pointed out, I will be dead (along with all the rest of us), and I may very reasonably, or even correctly, believe that I will be lucky enough to die before the policy unravels. When Catullus expresses his love *and* hate for Lesbia, he is not obviously voicing a wish to rid himself of one or the other of these two sentiments. Not all contradictions resolve into temporal change of belief or desire. Any attempt to think seriously about the relation between politics and ethics must remain cognitively sensitive to the fact that people’s beliefs, values, desires, moral conceptions, etc., are usually half-baked (in every sense), are almost certain to be both indeterminate and, to the extent to which they are determinate, grossly inconsistent in any but the most local,

